



UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
ASSOCIATION

**A VISION FOR
SOCIAL
WITNESS**

General Assembly
2016

Our philosophy

- 🕯️ We are a covenantal faith; as religious liberals we freely choose to enter into relationship with one another
- 🕯️ Our Ends are statements encompassing the “shared vision” of the association.
- 🕯️ Discernment (not deliberation) is how we should learn, understand, and decide on the elements of our covenant and our ends.

Big picture issues

- 🕯️ Policy governance
 - Board sets policy, staff implements.
- 🕯️ Commissions such as CSW (Commission on Social Witness) are independent and considered discernment groups.
- 🕯️ What does it mean to discern? How does discernment influence what we do as a denomination?
- 🕯️ Part of the Reimagining Covenant process

Congregations/Association Roles

- 🕯️ Current process places emphasis on work at the national/association-level.
- 🕯️ Often a few activists drive the process with little engagement of their congregations.
- 🕯️ Under congregational polity, congregations should drive action.
- 🕯️ Social action is often most effective at the local level.

Reimagining Covenant

- What if congregations are not important because they are contained entities, but because they are one of many ways of manifesting and incarnating a Unitarian Universalist mission in the world?
- What if our association is actually an alliance of mission partners, all related to each other by mutual and renewing covenants: radically interdependent, mutually accountable, flexible and dynamic?

Where we are now

- 🕯️ CSW – Facilitator of the process for developing social witness statements adopted by delegates.
- 🕯️ Process prescribed in detail in bylaws and in other documents (little room for innovation or flexibility.)
- 🕯️ The final statements do not bind the congregations; they do provide guidance to UUA staff.
- 🕯️ Current CSAI is minor factor into staff decisions about priorities.

Making Changes

- 🕯️ Several years ago, the UUA Board proposed having only one issue for 4 years of study and action and eliminating AIWs (Actions of Immediate Witness).
 - Delegates agreed to a 4-year process, with two issues running in a staggered sequence.
- 🕯️ Delegates rejected eliminating AIWs, but agreed to reduce the number.
 - For one GA, delegates agreed to suspend AIWs; a Responsive Resolution was used instead.

Issues with the current process

- 🕯️ Statements of Conscience (SOC) carry the full weight of the denomination and AIWs of only the delegates at one GA
 - Amount of time/energy spent on AIWs at a GA skews their relative importance.
- 🕯️ Study Action Issues are often recycled

More Issues

- 🕒 No time to fact check AIWs; process trusts that authors are accurate.
- 🕒 No process for updating adopted statements or archiving outdated statements.
- 🕒 No attempt to coordinate social action events at GA initiated by either the staff or the GAPC (General Assembly Planning Committee)

What The Presbyterians Are Doing

The Presbyterian Church has an Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy responsible for the process of developing and recommending social witness policy to the General Assembly. They work closely with the other committees within the Church. Social witness policy is always done in consultation with partners.

What The Methodists Are Doing

United Methodist Church speaks of the denomination as “the connection.”

- The Connectional Table
- This past year the Connectional held a series of weekly videos
- Each video was accompanied by a conversation sheet with FAQs and questions for delegates to use to continue the dialogue
- Most of the process happens in legislative committees

What The Reform Jews Are Doing

Union of Reform Judaism has a Commission on Social Action with a Resolutions Committee that endorses, recommends rejection, or suggests revisions to resolutions to the General Assembly. URJ has created a space called The Tent to get congregations connecting on social justice campaigns and ministries.

Some ideas

- 🕯️ Redefine the relationship of the work of the CSW, the delegates, and staff
- 🕯️ Reconsider who can propose topics in need of study, discernment, and action
- 🕯️ At a GA general session, consider showcasing work done on adopted SOCs the congregational and denominational levels.
- 🕯️ Consider AIW alternatives

Possible Guidelines for Witnessing

2011 – Response to discussion concerning re-envisioning of Immediate Witness offered a set of principles and guidelines*:

1. Social justice action and dialogue should be a part of every General Assembly.
2. **Action** should be the priority for social justice issues on which we have already achieved consensus
3. **Dialogue** is needed when we have not yet achieved consensus on a particular issue

* Dr. Dan McKanan, Ralph Waldo Emerson UUA Senior Lecturer in Divinity at Harvard University and author of *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition*

Suggested Guidelines

4. Activists based in local congregations should have the opportunity to inform the General Assembly of important activist campaigns, and to invite local action elsewhere. This goal does not require the Assembly to agree on the precise phrasing of a statement.

Suggested Guidelines

5. In some cases, we can be very helpful to our allies in social justice by endorsing particular campaigns.
 - a. In these cases, it will be necessary for the Assembly to agree on a precise statement.
 - b. Such statements will ordinarily be extremely brief, and voting would be only on the most essential part of the statement.

Suggested Guidelines

6. The General Assembly can be helpful to our national social witness staff by clarifying a consensus position on a particular issue.
Wordsmithing in plenary is almost never helpful.
7. The democratic process of the mini-assembly can make helpful contributions to social witness, and decisions of mini-assemblies should be respected whenever possible.

Suggested Guidelines

9. The role of the Commission on Social Witness can facilitate the process.

10. To facilitate creative experimentation, the bylaws should not mandate the details of the process.



An Idea we Might Try in 2017

- 🕯️ Use Open-space type format
- 🕯️ CSW would provide a time and place for interested people to share their interest in selected issues
- 🕯️ Delegates would propose issues
 - if too many proposed, CSW would make selection and announce the selections so people could choose.

What might happen in 2017

- 🕯️ If there is consensus that the UUA should take collective action, that could be proposed and submitted to the appropriate UUA Office.
- 🕯️ If there is a feeling that formal GA action is needed, a Responsive Resolution could be proposed.
- 🕯️ If some participants want to do collective action at GA, they could organize for action.
- 🕯️ Some groups might want to continue the conversation after GA through a list serve or social media.

Questions?



Your Vision

Round Robin

- Divide into groups – several in room; one for off-site delegates.
- Each group will consider all questions. For those in the room, groups will start with different questions and then on signal circulate to another question.
- Write your ideas on sticky notes and place on poster or write on poster paper, or submit via e-mail.

At end

- Circulate to see all comments. Facilitator for each question will provide summary (as time permits).
- All comments will be shared with CSW, staff, and board and will be posted on CSW portion of UUA website.

Discussion: How might Covenanted communities work engage in social witness activities together?

1. How does social witness work contribute to achieving the Global Ends?
2. How can other congregations and partners help congregations engage in social justice work?
3. (How) should an Association of Congregations contribute to the public discourse on social justice issues?
4. What should be the source for social justice positions taken on behalf of Unitarian Universalists?
5. For engaging in social witness activities, what is the role of
 - a. delegates at a general assembly
 - b. related organizations (such as UUJEC, Ministry for Earth, Peace Ministry Network, DRUUMM,...)
 - c. a discerning group (CSW)/of UUA staff (including Standing on the Side of Love, Multicultural Growth and Witness...) related to engaging in social witness activities?